

Reception for the presentation of the convergence document "Learning from Each Other – Believing Together" on 20.04.2009 in the regional ecclesiastical church of the ELKiB in Munich

Foreword by Michael Martin, Member of the High Consistory

Dear General Secretary Claas, dear Bishop Friedrich, dear guests and guests of honour, dear 'Balubager', sisters and brothers!

The year 2009 is an excellent moment to present a result of the dialogue between Lutherans and Baptists. This year we will celebrate 400 years of Baptists, for in the year 1609 the first Baptist church was founded in Amsterdam. Moreover, exactly 175 years have passed since the first Baptist fellowship in Hamburg started their work in Germany.

Therefore it is about time to end the "un-relationship" - as Erich Geldbach called it – between territorial churches and the free churches in general, and between Lutherans and Baptists in particular. Precisely here with the result of our doctrinal conversation we want to make a contribution.

The working group first met on the 28th of March 2003. Baptists and Lutherans from Bavaria came together. A name was quickly found: BALUBAG – meaning Bavarian-Lutheran-Baptist-group. Much more important than the name though was the ambitious working programme, which was been outlined on several pages right on the first meeting: "The exchange of spiritual riches in the pulpit fellowship and common celebration of the Lord's Supper" was recorded as the aim of the dialogue, and to mutually acknowledge each other as "Church of Jesus Christ".

The working group had its historical centre in the City-ACK in Nuremberg. There, but also in the Bavarian ACK relationships of trust have grown over the years between Lutherans and Baptists. No wonder that the ACK played such a prominent role for the rapprochement between Baptists and Lutherans. Lutherans as well as Baptists were founding members on the 10th of March in 1948 of the consortium of Christian churches in Germany (ACK). Even if the Baptists count as one of the "small churches in Bavaria" they are one of the biggest protestant churches worldwide. Right from the beginning it was most important for the Lutheran and Baptist members of the group not to confine the dialogue to Bavaria only. So, not only the presidium of the Baptist union in Germany (BEFG), but the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (VELKD), and the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) as well as were informed. All three of them have given their common consent and commissioned us with the undertaking of this dialogue. For the Lutherans, the VELKD and the EKD have asked the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria to fulfil this task. That is how finally the doctrinal conversation group was dispatched by the government of the Bavarian state association in the Baptist union in Germany and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria.

The starting point of our work was the task assigned in the results of the doctrinal conversation between the European Baptist Federation (EBF) and the Community of Evangelical Churches in Europe (GEKE) as well as the brief of the Charter Oecumenica for the regionalisation of inner-church encounters and doctrinal dialogues. The trust which has grown in our churches during the last decades is helpful, but not yet a guarantee for the success of a doctrinal conversation. If one looks from the starting year 2003 and the concluding year of 2009, those 6 years of hard work do not fit so easily together with the initially optimistic tone of the first encounter. Yes, the working group started full of hopes and were optimistic about their work. However the intense discussions about the theology and most of all about the practices in our churches stumbled upon constraints in such a way that failure

was also possible. For both churches these discussions touched the fundamentals of their belief and their own identities. Therefore it has been a good decision to leave out classical and emotionally-loaded controversial topics and to start by examining the common basis of our faith.

In doing so the main topic was about the theological fundamentals of our community. Very quickly it became clear that we have much more in common than what would divide with respect to justification and discipleship – thus understanding that there are no church-dividing differences in our understanding of gospel. Also – not less important for our fellowship – the conversations dealt with historical clarifications. Here, a first result was achieved, in that the Lutheran side dispensed with the medieval term for heretics “Anabaptist”, being conscious of the injustices which also Baptists encountered. This was not easy, but it was a necessary clarification, without which further progress in the dialogue would not have been possible. It was very helpful to look at the result of the dialogue between Lutherans and Mennonites from the 1990's. On this basis it became possible - after critical acceptance of the multilateral and bilateral dialogue results – to address the first controversial topics.

An interim report presented to the commissioning bodies showed the results the group had worked out until then – under the exclusion of the question of baptism. For the last phase of their work there remained – not unexpectedly – above all the question of the teaching and the practice of baptism. It was manifest that for Baptists and Lutherans alike, important fundamental theological directions and great emotions are bound with the question of baptism. The question of finding a gracious God was a key question for Martin Luther and still is one for the Lutherans. As it is closely related to infant baptism, which Baptists reject, as is well known– or to put it more carefully: do not practice – it became obvious which fundamental theological decisions had to be picked out as central themes.

Maybe one could put it like this: The meaning of Eucharist or the Lord's Supper for the unity and identity of churches in the dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans corresponds to the dialogue between Baptists and Lutherans and the question of the meaning and practice of baptism.

Therefore it was important for us to clarify our different pasts with baptism, with their strengths and weaknesses but also with their sensibilities. Particularly significant were our basic choices of methodology. Together we have listened to the gospel in the Holy Scripture, have mutually explained our concerns and which meaning these have in our present practice. We have set aside our traditional arguments of confessional polemic, that go back to grievances and extreme positions within our confessions. We have also set forth the different theological concerns about baptism practices from our corresponding understanding of the gospel, which connects us. This is where we learned a lot from each other and thus opened new horizons for one another. At the same time we have worked on an explanatory statement in order to make a significant step towards each other in the question of baptism. What means for the Baptists, we have perceived by reading between the lines from Prof. Strübind.

For us Lutherans the biggest challenge has been connected with the practice of baptism: When a Baptist congregation concurs with the wish for baptism of a baptismal candidate, who has already been baptized as a Lutheran as an infant or a toddler. Through such a baptism we see the unconditional promise of God being disputed – we see this for the candidate for baptism as well as for the baptizing community. When that happens –a border is crossed – to quote our document – that thus endangers the church fellowship, which we are aiming for. For both sides it has been important to clarify this without misunderstanding. It is also stated in the final report: The achieved basic consent of both churches is regarded as sustainable enough, that the Lutheran side can imagine accepting such a baptism in individual cases for pastoral reasons, if this practice does not as a rule become a church act in Baptist congregations. For the Lutheran side this is a big step. A

step though, we are convinced of being well grounded, appropriate, correct, and above all necessary. Necessary because it conforms to the Gospel, is well considered theologically and essential on its way to a church fellowship between Lutherans and Baptists in Germany.

For our working group this has been a long, arduous, but also a very encouraging and promising path. Much has happened to us and the participants of these dialogues on the way which cannot be written down in a consensus document. We have been transformed through this dialogue. Some very familiar biblical texts have sometimes triggered off completely new tracks of thought. Finally we have in spite of deep and serious theological discussions also been able, every now and then, to be cheerful and laugh together.

We are causing quite a stir for our churches by confrontating them with the results of our dialogues. I am certain though that this is the time for this debate and the resulting consequences. They will help us find a better understanding for one another. They will help to fill in trenches and surmount walls. Most of all they will bring us closer to the plea of Jesus Christ that all should be one. The provisional conclusion of the discussion of our BALUBAG - Bavarian-Lutheran-Baptist-group is at the same time a new beginning of discussions between our churches and communities. I am looking forward to it. Simultaneously it provides an opportunity to value that which has been achieved and to put on the record: Today, 400 years after the founding of the first Baptist congregation in Amsterdam, the "un-relationship" in the connection between Baptists and Lutherans has come to an end. If we have managed by means of our doctrinal conversations to make a small contribution, then the efforts of six years of hard work were worth it.

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